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Boosting our tourism potential

INTERNATIONAL entrepreneur Mohamad Al Fayed's observation of Malaysia's tourism potential and its promotional effort is refreshing and indeed food for thought for the authorities concerned and the citizenry. His host, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, sums up his guest's view as thus: Al Fayed believes "we have not promoted ourselves well".

Such candour is rare. But it is clear that the owner of the famed London store, Harrods, spoke his mind with a view to helping Malaysia exploit its tremendous tourism potential to the fullest. While he is impressed by the potential of local attractions, he feels strongly that the country needs aggressive marketing. That he will lend a hand given his wide business connections is reassuring.

Tourism has been recognised as the world's largest industry, contributing about 11 per cent to its gross domestic product. Job-wise, the industry employs almost 11 per cent of the world's workforce. In the Malaysian context, the importance of the industry cannot be over-emphasised. In 1996, tourism moved up from fourth position the previous year to the Number Two slot in the country's tally of foreign exchange earnings. Replacing petroleum as Malaysia's second biggest foreign exchange earner after manufacturing, revenue from this sector soared to RM11.2 billion. That was a good year, for the 13 per cent increase in receipts was achieved despite a 4.4 per cent drop in tourist arrivals to 7.1 million. The rise was due to Malaysia attracting "quality" tourists.

The rising number of tourist arrivals and revenue in the past decade speak eloquently of the country's growing achievements in this service sector. Nonetheless, much more needs to be done to attain the target of 12.5 million tourist arrivals with an estimated revenue of RM15.7 billion by the turn of the century. This year, the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry is realistically expecting 7.8 million arrivals, revised downwards from 8.7 million forecast earlier in view of the regional economic problems.

That the authorities themselves have rightly acknowledged time and again that the tourism industry is "very competitive" demonstrates the realisation that spectacular results are not forthcoming without extra effort. This of course has to be matched by correct planning and strategy as well as follow-up actions. Al Fayed's honest views will no doubt be taken seriously. A valuable tip is that the audio visual presentation he saw of Langkawi, although good, does not portray the beauty of the islands enough.

Malaysians themselves would like to offer their views so that the country could exploit the full potential of its tourism industry for the benefit of locals and foreigners. Seasoned travellers feel strongly that the authorities should aggressively promote Malaysia's rich untouched landscape, flora and fauna as well as diverse ethnic cultural heritage. This will not be complete without highlighting Sabah and Sarawak with their vast tropical forests, massive caves and other unique attractions. Eco-tourism projects with a bias for natural surroundings should be stepped up to enhance the nation's attractiveness as a tourist destination. We should capitalise on the North-South Expressway, making it a great holiday experience just to drive along it. To make this a reality, there should be impressive tourist spots along the way complete with conveniences, including a good hired-car system.

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